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LETTER DATED 5 AUGUST 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ERITREA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to transmit to you a press statement issued today, 5 August 1998, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea concerning the meeting of the Ministerial Committee of the Organization of African Unity on the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict, held from 1 to 2 August (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate this letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Haile MENKERIOS
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex

Press statement issued 5 August 1998 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea

The Ministerial Committee of the Organization of African Unity on the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia will submit its recommendations to the Heads of State of the three countries in the next few days. The Committee underlined that these recommendations "will be fair and will take into account the legitimate concerns of the parties and the ideals of the Organization of African Unity".

The Ministerial Committee, which is composed of Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe and Djibouti, was convened at Ouagadougou from 1 to 2 August 1998 to review the findings of the Committee of Ambassadors that had visited Eritrea and Ethiopia earlier in July. Separate sessions with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Eritrea and Ethiopia were also held to exchange views and explore avenues for a peaceful solution.

In its final communiqué, the Ministerial Committee welcomed "the disposition reiterated by both parties to seek a peaceful solution to the dispute" and urged them "to continue their observance of the moratorium on air strikes and the present situation of no hostilities". The Government of Eritrea had expressed its readiness for an immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities and the placement of African observers under the auspices of the United Nations, pending a comprehensive peaceful solution to the conflict. However, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia told the Ministers that Ethiopia did not accept the cessation of hostilities and the placement of an observer force.

In regard to the substantive aspects of the conflict, the Ministerial Committee acknowledged that the two parties continue to hold "divergent points of view both on the origin and evolution of the dispute and the issues which must be considered to resolve the crisis". But it added that this should not preclude "the spirit of compromise to prevail", which will make it possible to respond to the fundamental concerns of each of the parties while respecting the principles of the Organization of African Unity.

The Government of Eritrea has all along maintained that the root cause of the dispute lay in Ethiopia's violation of Eritrea's colonial boundaries. Focus on secondary issues will therefore be unhelpful and only derail the peace process. Ethiopia's insistence on ascertaining first "which authority was administering Badme prior to the clashes of 6 May" was thus an obstructive posture mainly designed to divert the peace process. This glossed over Ethiopia's use of force earlier in July 1997 to occupy Adi-Murug, as well as to encroach on areas around Badme. Under these circumstances, "administration" in itself was not valid if the process by which that administration had been established was illegal. What is of paramount importance is to establish where Badme, Adi-Murug and other areas were situated within the recognized boundaries.

The Ministerial Committee emphasized that it "understands the viewpoint of Eritrea on the origin of the conflict" and underlined its concerns "about the incidents which have taken place at other places on the common border in July 1997". It noted that Badme town was administered by the Ethiopian authorities prior to the eruption of the recent round of clashes. But it acknowledged that this "does not obviously prejudge the final status of that area, which will be determined at the end of the delimitation and demarcation process and, if necessary, through arbitration".

In regard to violation of human rights and treatment of nationals by both sides, the Ministerial Committee stated that "it could not establish the reality of a systematic or official action directed against Ethiopians in Eritrea". But it expressed its deep concern about "the conditions under which the deportation of Eritreans was carried out by the Government of Ethiopia, the decision to extend those measures to the families of the deported persons and the fate of their properties".